

Water Predator: Privatization and Theft in a Climate of Uncertainty

It's been fifteen years now since I moved to Fryeburg, and started my inquiry process to the story behind the scores of tanker trucks rolling by our home all day and night. To this moment, the eighty-five hundred gallon water tankers barrel through town day and night, shaking the ground, leaving cracked windows and worn down roads as a parting gift while they take our water.

Soon after moving to town, we understood that many people were unhappy with the export of our groundwater, and told us stories of recently being sued by the corporation doing the exporting. We learned our town was sued for simply refusing a *second* tanker truck filling station to satisfy a growing bottled water market. So my mom and I started investigating. We talked to neighbors. We questioned people involved in the court case. We interviewed retired lawmakers. We spoke to elected officials. And we educated ourselves on the impacts of bottled water, water mining, and water exports from our community, state and other parts of the world.

As we were researching, we learned that the water exporter and our privately owned municipal water supplier was in the process of writing a forty-five year-long contract. A contract for such a long period placed control and security in the hands of a multinational corporation. The irresponsibility of this contract was astounding, considering what we knew about the climate crisis' impacts on water access, especially with a company that so troubling a record as Nestle.

So, in 2013, when I was nine years old, my mother and I delivered testimonies before the Maine Public Utilities Commission, speaking out against the proposed forty-five year contract between Nestle and the Fryeburg Water Company for mining our water. In my speech, I made the point that if this contract were accepted, I would not have a voice in this matter until I was fifty-four years old. Out of the dozens who spoke out against the contract, there were only three in favor, so we felt hopeful that our grassroots efforts would take effect.

Riding the wave of support and affirmations we received after the hearing, we created a petition based on testimony asking Governor LePage and the MPUC commissioners to block the forty-five year contract. After just a few weeks, we collected over a hundred thousand signatures. When we delivered the petition to the Governor's office, he refused to see us. We were completely rejected by the governor without any conversation. Interestingly enough, there were several Nestle representatives and lawyers observing us as we waited outside the governor's office and were interviewed by the media. They made it clear that we had entered their territory.

When we brought our case before the Maine Public Utilities Commission, we knew we would face difficulty due to the members' personal ties to Nestle. Several stood to make serious financial gain assuming they maintained pro-Nestle partiality. These ties made themselves clear as events unfolded. For example, when pro-Nestle speakers spoke, no matter who they were, the members of the Commission were present and focused, nodding with every argument they made. But when a speaker was in opposition, the Commissioners' eyes glazed over, and one even seemed to fall asleep as one of our speakers was presenting. Unsurprisingly, the verdict was in complete favor of Nestle. Though the loss was frustrating, it was the arrogance that angered me most. Nestle knew that the system was tipped in its favor, and that under the current order, corporations would win out in the halls of power.

Over the following years, I spoke at the statehouse several times. I was always nervous, as a ten year old, who wouldn't be? But as I was shaping myself into a persuasive speaker, and willing to go out of my comfort zone, I learned that no one might speak my truth for me, if I did not. I felt intimidated by critics and opponents, people who saw my activism merely as a marionette performance by my adult counterparts. But I could only tell them the truth about my beliefs, and continue organizing, educating and agitating where necessary, to bring this theft of water into the public conscience.

In early 2016, we attended a court case over the legality of Nestle's extraction operations in Fryeburg. A small group of us met up beforehand, giving a quick briefing and assuring one another that we could win.. I had a difficult time following the hearing as the lawyers were constantly referencing ordinances and state laws, and other language I was unacquainted with as a 12 year-old. However, to follow how the case was going, all I needed was to read my mother's facial expression at any moment. Waiting outside the courtroom, with us, the frontliners from Fryeburg, on one side and the Nestle lobbyists and lawyers on the other, the tension in the room was tangible. After the end of the court hearing, we were told we would get a final answer a month from then. A month passed by quickly, then two months, and finally, after three months, we got an answer. The court had sided with Nestle, and we lost the precedent-setting case.

Water privatization was, and remains, a grim prospect. Hopelessness weighed heavy in my mind as we continued to see the tanker trucks go by, but I found it within myself to keep organizing, speaking and learning about what large corporations like Nestle can do to a town like Fryeburg. Though we had not achieved our most visible and tangible goal, we had much to celebrate. The relationships we made in the nearly 4 year legal battle grew into a resilient network of communities across the state. We have seen many victories since, all crucial steps in the direction of water justice.